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# Education and Skills Committee - Testing and Assessment Inquiry: A response from Edexcel

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## Details

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## Introduction

This response is in 2 parts:

Part 1 describes who we are and what we do.

Part 2 provides responses to those specific questions posed by the Committee for which we have most direct experience. We have addressed issues regarding testing and assessment pre and post 16 together.

## Part 1: Who we are and what we do

1.1 Edexcel is one of the largest awarding bodies in the UK and a Pearson company. It offers a wide range of academic and vocational qualifications, testing and assessment services and associated products and support aimed at helping teachers to teach and students of all ages to learn and get on in their lives.

1.2 Qualifications offered by Edexcel include GCSEs and A levels, Key and Basic Skills, NVQs, professional qualifications and the BTEC qualification suite. In the UK, Edexcel qualifications are taken by over 4200 secondary schools, 450 colleges, 80 Higher Education (HE) institutions, 800 public and private sector employers and a number of e-learning providers. Internationally, Edexcel operates in over 100 countries.

## Part 2: Edexcel responses

### 2.1 Why do we have a centrally run system of testing and assessment?

2.1.1 Since the establishment of the National Curriculum, testing has been a key central mechanism for driving up standards in schools.

- 2.1.2 Testing was the mechanism for making schools accountable in the drive to raise standards.
- 2.1.3 The need for improvement when compared to standards elsewhere in the world was high.
- 2.1.4 The issue is that forms of assessment that raise standards are not the same as those that are right for accountability.
- 2.1.5 Comparability became possible as all pupils were doing the same test at the same time.

## 2.2 What other systems of assessment are in place both internationally and across the UK?

- 2.2.1 Within the UK, it would be useful to examine the approach to testing in Scotland.
- 2.2.2 International comparison studies are available, particularly TIMMS and PISA.
- 2.2.3 The approach in Norway is to make assessment a major part of professional development. This approach differs from England and Wales in that national assessment is an event that is external to the school and hence leads to being something done to schools as apposed to the school being a part of the process.
- 2.2.4 The USA makes extensive use of testing. The difference between the UK and the USA is that of validity and reliability. In the USA the emphasis is on high reliability whereas our emphasis is on high validity. Whilst this is a generalisation and there are notable exceptions in both countries, the assertion is general true.
- 2.2.5 There are many commercial assessment instruments available to schools. The oldest and one of the most respected are the NFER standardised tests. Durham University has over the last few years established itself as a major provider of school tests.

## 2.3 Does a focus on national testing and assessment reduce the scope for creativity in the curriculum?

- 2.3.1 In the main, yes; this is a function of the nature of the National Curriculum. How restrictive a curriculum do we want? The more prescriptive the curriculum, the more restrictive will be the assessment.
- 2.3.2 There is a cost / benefit issue here; creativity is the cost of a prescriptive National Curriculum which has the benefit of being an effective driver for accountability.
- 2.3.3 Too much weight on the outcomes of assessment can damage creativity. The emphasis for the school can become understandingly, the test. Creativity, by its nature is not known to flourish during a timed test.

## 2.4 Who is the QCA accountable to and is this accountability effective?

- 2.4.1 The QCA is accountable to the DfES. There is an argument that testing and assessment should also be subject to independent scrutiny.

## 2.5 What role should exam boards have in testing and assessment?

- 2.5.1 The key difference between national tests and GCSE, GCE, diplomas, BTEC is that the latter are qualifications. Exam boards have a wealth of assessment expertise and could have a role in formative

assessment. They have a global view of assessment over a large range of qualifications; they are well placed to position national testing into the gamete of predictive assessment and comparability.

## 2.6 How effective are the current Key Stage tests?

2.6.1 There is no single answer to this question.

2.6.2 They are fairly effective as curriculum drivers.

2.6.3 They are very effective at assessing part of the curriculum but there are aspects that are not susceptible to a timed test of short questions.

2.6.4 As a measure of progress for a school they can mask the many unexplained variables which may be making a significant contribution to a schools performance.

2.6.5 The introduction of national tests improved standards. It is less clear as to whether a plateau has been reached as to the contribution that national tests can make to further improvement.

2.6.6 The tests have been effective at raising standards through accountability. The future for raising standards may be a combination of standard tests and an assessment for learning approach.

2.6.7 As valid and reliable tests, they are the best that can be achieved in their current format.

2.6.8 The tests have been effective in bringing a common expectation of teacher performance. The questions remains, is it the right expectation?

## 2.7 Do they adequately reflect levels of performance of children and schools, and changes in performance over time?

2.7.1 They adequately reflect performance on short written tests; to what extent this reflects levels of performance for all children could be questioned.

2.7.2 They are good at giving a level across each curriculum subject. They do not give enough detail of each particular part of the curriculum.

2.7.3 They are good at reflecting the performance of schools.

2.7.4 There are too many expectations for one test. They do not support the subdivision of attainment into smaller levels. It would be useful for the committee to revisit the Task Group for Assessment and Testing Report which gives a different complexion to the use of levels.

2.7.5 Whilst the tests give a useful indication of changes in performance over time, they are not suited to influencing major decision making. The curriculum has changed over time, new elements have been introduced and different approaches rewarded. To accurately measure such progress, the curriculum would need to be stable and the same test used each year.

## 2.8 Do they provide assessment for learning (enabling teachers to concentrate on areas of a pupil's performance that needs improvement)?

2.8.1 Sometimes they are good indicators of areas that a teacher should concentrate on. However, they are not diagnostic and many areas of understanding are not covered in a particular test. So they are not sufficient as the sole indicator of pupil performance.

## 2.9 Does testing help to improve levels of attainment?

2.9.1 Yes, indirectly through accountability.

2.9.2 Measurement on its own is not sufficient, levels of attainment improve when performance is targeted by teachers.

2.9.3 A consequence of testing is to narrow progression for schools that over prepare children for a particular level on a test.

## 2.10 Are they effective in holding schools accountable for their performance?

2.10.1 To some extent but there are possibilities for schools to use the value added indicator tactically by ensuring that there is adequate attainment in early tests and maximum attainment in a final years test. This practice is not widespread but is a reaction to what is perceived to be a strategic response to high stakes testing.

2.10.2 The tests report performance around the average; the extremes of performance are not obvious. Seventy per cent at level four and above could mean both seventy per cent at level four or seventy per cent at level five.

2.10.3 The tests, by their nature, provide a crude measure and it is easy for schools to find themselves in a comfort zone.

2.10.4 They only hold schools accountable for English, mathematics and science.

## 2.11 How effective are performance measures such as value-added scores for schools?

2.11.1 Value added is a useful measure.

2.11.2 There are ceiling effects for some schools; can you make significant improvement for ever? Low intakes make consistent performance a factor of the ability of a particular cohort of children.

2.11.3 The value added measure is not a transparent process; it is not easy to judge the validity of the variables.

## 2.12 Are league tables based on test results an accurate reflection of how well schools are performing?

2.12.1 They do not present the full picture. They provide a crude score of particular areas of a school's provision. That is not to say that they are not a useful measure; however, it would be misleading to use them as the single predictor of performance.

## 2.13 To what extent is there 'teaching to the test'?

2.13.1 Everywhere, but that can be a positive thing. The test assesses the curriculum and so teaching to the test is teaching to the curriculum.

2.13.2 The problem is that short answer tests do not assess all parts of the curriculum. So excessive teaching to the test narrows the curriculum experience for the pupils.

2.13.3 Teaching to the test distorts the curriculum when taken to the extreme.

2.13.4 It is acknowledged that tests can define a curriculum but they are not the most appropriate driver for ensuring a comprehensive teaching approach.

## 2.14 How much of a factor is 'hot-housing' in the fall-off in pupil performance from Year 6 to Year 7?

2.14.1 Many pupils are looked after at the end of key stage 2 with one to one attention to address areas in which they are having difficulties; so hot-housing is a factor.

2.14.2 It is not the only factor and may not be the most significant. Other to consider are: lack of expectation by year 7 teachers; lack of use of the information from the key stage 2 school; and, very importantly, the change of social situation for the pupils. In addition, pupils themselves are beginning to change.

## 2.15 Does the importance given to test results mean that teaching generally is narrowly focused?

2.15.1 On balance, yes for the core subjects; however, the introduction of end of key stage tests widened the curriculum for many pupils.

## 2.16 What role does assessment by teachers have in teaching and learning?

2.16.1 What role does teacher assessment play or what role should teacher assessment play? There is considerable variance within classrooms.

2.16.2 Ofsted says that teacher assessment does not play a significant role at present. This may be because assessment has been taken out of the hands of teachers; it is something that is done to the pupils from outside.

2.16.3 For some, teacher assessment is undertaken by mimicking the national tests; this is not the most productive way of using the opportunities that teachers have in the classroom.

2.16.4 The link between teacher assessment and learning needs to be strengthened; this will not be the case unless teacher expectation is that they are in control of formative assessment.

## 2.17 Should the system of national tests be changed?

2.17.1 On balance: yes.

## 2.18 If so, should the tests be modified or abolished?

2.18.1 National testing has too many purposes attributed on one test experience.

2.18.2 A national picture of standards could be found by sampling pupils.

2.18.3 For formative assessment; instruments should be provided that help teachers address the different aspects of the curriculum. Good formative assessment which influences learning will raise standards.

2.18.4 Teachers need to be trained in assessment techniques and interpreting assessment outcomes. Teachers should be doing assessment not administering an external test.

2.18.5 Tests which have been standardised should be an important addition to teacher assessment. The administration of such tests should be in the hands of the school.

2.18.6 Schools should be accountable. Assessments should be moderated and schools should be able to demonstrate progress and that they are raising standards. For standards to rise within a school, there needs to be attention to assessment outcomes, appropriate teaching, well developed curriculum guidelines and social structures, such as behaviour. All these aspects should be monitored by Ofsted.

2.19 The Secretary of State has suggested that there should be a move to more personalised assessment to measure how a pupil's level of attainment has improved over time. Pilot areas to test proposals have just been announced. Would the introduction of this kind of assessment make it possible to make an overall judgment on a school's performance?

2.19.1 Could be, it depends on the nature of the personalised assessment. Single level progress tests will not be sufficient to judge personal progress. Such assessments could lead to a distortion of the curriculum as schools focus on a competency approach to pupil performance.

2.19.2 We would support measures that incorporated a tool kit of assessment opportunities for teachers. These would include standardised tests and assessments when ready.

2.20 Would it be possible to make meaningful comparisons between different schools?

2.20.1 Yes, but a meaningful comparison would be more than performance tables of attainment on single level tests.

2.21 What effect would testing at different times have on pupils and schools? Would it create pressure on schools to push pupils to take tests earlier?

2.21.1 More than likely it would increase the testing burden.

2.21.2 At the end of a key stage the focus of the curriculum becomes narrowed as pupils are prepared for the test. This will be compounded by more frequent test exposure.

2.21.3 This can be ameliorated by a test design that complements teacher assessment.

2.22 If Key Stage tests remain, what should they be seeking to measure?

2.22.1 They should measure pupil attainment at the end of the key stage across as much of the programme of study as is appropriate for the test structure. As such they will give a national picture of standards.

2.22.2 Sampling would be sufficient and could identify trends and patterns.

2.22.3 School accountability should be by more intensive assessment measures as described above and moderated by Ofsted.

2.23 If, for example, performance at Level 4 is the average level of attainment for an eleven year old, what proportion of children is it reasonable to expect to achieve at or above that level?

2.23.1 It depends on how wide the band for average is to be. As with all things in this area, policy will dictate not pupil performance.

2.23.2 The level descriptions are meaningful, but their interpretation has been narrowed down to match expectations in the tests. It would be useful for the Committee to refer back to the Task Group on Assessment and Testing report which established the original ten level scale.

2.24 How are the different levels of performance expected at each age decided on? Is there broad agreement that the levels are appropriate and meaningful?

2.24.1 They have become, de facto, the accepted levels as policy documents repeatedly stated the level of attainment for the average pupil.

2.24.2 They were originally standardised using teacher judgement and, once established, have to be maintained if comparison over time is to be meaningful.

2.24.3 The issue is, if standards rise and level 4 remains average performance, then the difficulty of level four needs to increase accordingly.